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The Role of Regional Geography in the Romanian Students' Training, as Future Specialists in Tourism

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Abstract

During the last decade of the Romanian post-socialism, the higher education system of Romania encountered many curricular changes in order to adjust the Romanian student's instruction to the international requirements in education. In this respect, new educational contents and subjects were designed and included within the national curriculum aiming to provide, both a qualitative learning, and a proper instruction related to the real insertion of the students in the labour market. This article unveils some issues connected to a new geographic subject in terms of Regional Geography. It was recently included in the higher education curriculum of the students of the Tourism Geography Program from West University of Timișoara, Romania. The aim of this new subject was to provide a proper knowledge in the field of the regional issues of the world in addition to their future training as tourism specialists. This study illustrates the feed-back of the learning process of the Regional Geography taking into account the major trends in approaching the contents of this new subject. The methodological design of the research is based both on quantitative and qualitative methods. In order to evaluate the instruction progress of the students, we sampled two groups of 35 students each. They were surveyed using the questionnaires method in 2012 and 2013. The findings of the research illustrate the student's interest degree for this subject as well as some limits in their training. Nonetheless, Regional Geography seems to be a relevant subject in the contemporary students training as future specialists in tourism.

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1. Introduction

This paper deals with the contemporary curriculum in the Romanian higher education, focusing on the geographical one, in terms of the new subjects recent included in the study programs of the students. Related to the

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contemporary dynamics of the national and international curriculum ruled both by the Bologna system and, at the national scale, by the Romanian Ministry of Education, the current curriculum is focussed on providing the quality learning and an objective training connected to the contemporary demands of the national and international labour market. A concise review on the specialized literature, both at the international scale and at the national level, reveals important preoccupation in the field of higher education curriculum as well as in its feed-back regardless the field or the domain of study. Curriculum is an important component in the contemporary higher education being related to the current global transformations in the higher education. In this respect, concepts, as Europeanization and internationalization of the curriculum, seems to be basically in order to provide an appropriate instruction to the current demands of the world labour market. Consequently, after the Treaty of Bologna that claims for a global quality education, the Europeanization and internationalization of the curriculum in higher education, the research interest in this field arose (see Erickson, 2012; Fortujin, 2012; Higgitt, 2012). On the other hand, curriculum itself became an important topic for analysis in order to provide the proper tools in instruction. Hence, the concept of curriculum involves many conceptual approaches as well as many definitions that varied depending on the used standpoints by the contemporary scholars.

Therefore, there are many research conducted on the curriculum themes pointing out their importance in the current landscape of education, both at the national and international scale. Being a ubiquitous concept, internationalisation of the curriculum in higher education is complex and meanings and practices in the area are vague (Welikala, 2011, p. 4, 6). Then, continuous research in the field are demanded as more as „curriculum development process also undergoes transformation due to newer developments in education and its evaluation keeps it valid, reliable and keeps it in the right direction” (Hussain *et al.*, 2011, p. 263). Moreover the current studies are welcomed because; curriculum is one of the most significant matters in higher education. However little attention has been given to the evolution of curriculum and its review and transformation in the institutions” (Oliver and Hyun, p. 2), it being, a fundamental matter for the “well-being and effectiveness of higher education” (Barnett and Coate, 2005, p. 7). These conceptual arguments legitimate the paper that wants to be a regular and rightful complement to the existing literature but with an interesting, add value in the national curriculum. It join to different contemporary national and international approaches on the curriculum theorized and analysed from different perspectives, both at national and international level (see Stark and Lattuca, 1997; Bets and Smith, 1998; Young, 1998; Jones, 2002; Higbee, ed., 2003; Karseth, 2003; Crețu and Nicu, 2004; Dulamă, 2004; 2006; 2008; 2010; Maher, 2004; Bazerman *et al.*, 2005; Ilinca and Mândruț, eds., 2006; Slattery, 2006; Roy, Borin and Kustra, 2007; Wolf and Hughes, eds., 2007; Dulamă and Roșcovan, 2007; Jucu, 2008; Jucu, 2012; Mândruț, 2010; Welikala, 2011; Dulamă, Ilovan and Bucilă, eds., 2012; Jucu and Gheorghită, 2012). In order to reveal the particular integration of the Regional geography in the current curriculum of the Romanian students, the paper proceeds as follows: Firstly, the purpose of the study shows the aims of the study as well as the methodological design. Secondly, it highlights the main results accompanied, in the end, by some concluding remarks, encompassing the most important findings of the research.

2. Purpose of the study, data and research methods

In the educational landscape of Romanian higher education, Regional geography seems to be an important subject, its presence in the Romanian curriculum behaving different postures. Since 2011, Regional geography, in terms of the study of extra-European continents, has been included in the curriculum of the Tourism Geography Program. It added to the Geography of Europe that already has been existed in this program of study. In such circumstances, the students presented a real gap in the study of regional geography. In this regard, the paper tries to unveil the main role of this subject in the Romanian students’ instruction and training as future specialist in tourism. The paper bases on the study of the current curricular documents as well as on the questionnaire survey. Therefore two sample groups of students (of 35 students each) have been chosen in the summer of 2012 (the starting point of the study of Regional geography) and 2013. The results of the analysis are able to provide an objective outcome as well as a real reflection concerning the role of the Regional geography in the Romanian students’ training as future specialist in touristic sector.

3. Results and discussion: The importance of Regional Geography in students training

In the 6th edition of his book entitled *World Regional Geography*, Hobbs (2009, p. 15), points out that „the

regional approach is an extremely effective way for students to understand what is happening in the world today.” This account argues however the importance of Regional geography in the students training. Furthermore, in its welcome word of the World Regional Geography, the author mention an article from National Geographic Journal, highlighting the lack of the regional knowledge in geography, considering the young American citizens. If this reality happens in a most developed state of the world, it is understood, that this fact is also appropriate for other places in the world. Starting from this perspective, associated to the reality that regional geography is as old as geography itself, being a subject of a geographic space correctly defined and bounded, interrelated with the current complex processes and phenomena (Cocean, 2002, 2005, 2010), this argument emphasize that Regional geography represents an important discipline that has to be studied by the students. It is a reason for which it was included in the Romanian curriculum addressed to the students trained as future specialists in tourism. Furthermore, the study of this subject is a real contribution to the increasing value of the general knowledge as well as practice skills of the students. Beyond this argumentative background, it is important to note the student’s opinions concerning the study of the regional geography in the Romanian higher education system. Their voices and assessments are unveiled in the next sections.

3.1. Strengthens of the study the Regional Geography by the students

According to the applied questionnaire the main strengthens in studying Regional geography are represented by the following views: the scientific content is relevant, in order to provide a complete general knowledge as well as a global functional perspective on the contemporary world; the contents and topics of Regional geography are appropriate for the students training as future employees in touristic activities; the topics are often interesting focussing on the current problems of the regions exceeding theoretical and descriptive dimensions; detailed and in-depth analyses of the regions are welcomed, leading to their comprehensive understanding; the new methods used are able to generate new skills and competencies in studying the regions of the world; furthermore, beyond the complexity and volume of the information, the content are well selected and understood, raising new directions for further research and documentation; the knowledge is focussed on interesting contents as well as on actual topics with the world regions faced out during the contemporary period; on the other hand, the training is welcomed because of the thoroughgoing of some previous contents from different other geographic fields that could be approached in complex and various ways; the usage of comparative method in studying the regions provide a clear understanding of the world discrepancies in terms of natural, anthropic, economic, social and cultural environments; in terms of subjective interests, the students discover important details concerning their preferred places in the world whether they are less known or are summarized in the current specialized literature; the practical activities, using new research methods, are welcomed providing complex skills in research activities focused on the regional geography; the opportunity to analyse the regions of the world using different algorithmic models is also important. To these attributes, there are others, we can adjoin: the simplicity in learning as outcome of the contents structuring, of the logic of information and data restructuring etc. Assessing the opportunity of the course of Regional Geography, the majority questioned students reveal that the course is useful (59 percent) and very useful (12 percent) in their training and only 3 percent of them consider that the Regional Geography is useless. Of the questioned students, 26 percent assumed that the course is moderate useful. These regards illustrates however the legitimacy of the Regional geography in the current curriculum.

3.2. Weaknesses in the study of the Regional Geography by the students

Together with the mentioned strengthens, there were identified also some weaknesses in the study of the Regional geography. They are as follows: the presence of a large volume of information in a short time (it is due to the vastest and complex contents of the Regional geography as a study subject) as well as the limited resources of time assigned to the study of this discipline; related to this regard, the most important current problems of the world are succinctly studied in the organisational frame; on the other hand, the students reject the large quantity of the names blaming the quantitative perspective in their study, as well as difficulties of some topics that are hardly understood as a result of the limited time provided. Related to this the exclusion of some regions in the teaching and learning process of Regional geography is perceived as a deficit, also occurred by the limited resources of time. In this respect, we have to note that all the continents of the world have to be learnt during 14 weeks (one semester). In

this limited horizon of time, there are studied all continents of the world excepting Europe. Taking into account the complexity of the problems as well as the geographic topics of such continents as Africa, Asia, South America etc., this weakness is justified.

3.3. Other considerations, problems, topics of interest and further suggestions

Beyond strengths and the weaknesses of the course of Regional geography, the students revealed other issues and opinions concerning this subject. Assessing the course quality as well as its suitability in their training is important to note that on a scale between 1 to 10, 5 percent of them assess the course with 10, and 2 percent with 5. Between these assessments, 64 percent of students evaluate the course with 9 and 12 percent with 7, while 8 percent of them assess the course with 6. A global perspective on this assessment indicates that the majority of the students, assess well the suitability of the Regional geography in their training as future specialists in tourism considering that the study of this subject matters in their instruction related to their future professional orientation. In this respect, the course is opportune for their training especially in addition to other geographic or non-geographic subjects. Furthermore, the students also highlight the relevance of inter-disciplinary or multi-disciplinary approaches, pointing out the cross-curricular perspective in their current training. It is in line with some transversal subjects, recently introduced in the Romanian higher education curriculum. Taking into account the methods used in teaching and learning activities, they consider that these procedural resources are efficient in their training, highlighting the increased role of the research projects in the field of Regional geography. Considering the topics of interest, the students call for different new themes focused on population, migrations and their consequences, the current problems of the urban settlements, the political and geopolitical issues in some hot-spots regions of the world, the environment problems as well as issues in social and cultural field of different regions. Regarding the role of the subject in their training, the opportunity of Regional geography is assumed by the following considerations: the specialists in tourism have to cultivate a proper instruction and education based on the culture of Regional geography in terms of regions, geography, culture and the senses of places at different scales of resolution; they have to learn better the current world whether it is in geographic or touristic terms; the study is important because of close relations between geography and tourism and, last but not least, the tourism specialist have to complete a proper geographic knowledge and culture, in order to face with the future clients whatever could be their touristic jobs. Nonetheless, it is important to state that the main contradiction between the scientific content of Regional geography as well as its research procedures and pedagogical demands related to the students' training, the main shortcoming is assumed by the resources of time often limited. This could represent a reflection topic considering the relevance of these subjects in the students' instruction as future specialists in tourism as well as geographers.

4. Conclusions

This paper highlights the importance of Regional geography both in the Romanian higher education curriculum and in the students' training as future practitioners in touristic activities. Taking into account the theoretic background provided by the specialized literature as well as by the quantitative and qualitative research, it is important to state that the study of Regional geography by the students in the Romanian higher education system plays an important role in their current and further training. The topics of Regional geography are welcomed, providing an appropriate instruction in relation with the student's integration in the future labour market. Considered often obsolete, excessive quantity and static by some students, Regional geography seems to be more dynamic, with considerable attributes in students' training. Advocating for new approaches in this field as well as for cross-disciplinary manners in teaching and learning Regional geography, we can conclude that this subject will continue to maintain its role in the student's instruction rising new and multiple research perspectives both in its own core field as well as in the pedagogic and didactic areas.

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